

Interview Transcript

Project: Mount Saint Mary's University--CSJ Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Sister Irma Obabashian

Interviewer: Shannon Green, Director, CSJ Institute, Mount Saint Mary's University; Roman Zenz, Film and Television, Mount Saint Mary's University; Mary Trunk, Instructor, Film and Television, Mount Saint Mary's University

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Transcribed By: Nancy Steinmann

[00:00:00.00] [Director's comments].

[00:00:14.24] SHANNON GREEN: This is Shannon Green, the Mount Saint Mary's University, the Oral History project. Today is Friday, August 2 [2019], filming at Carondelet Center. Present is Mary Trunk, Roman Zenz, and first interview is Sister Irma Obabashian, Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet [CSJ].

[00:00:34.08] SHANNON GREEN: Sister Irma, could you start us out by stating your full name and your age for us?

[00:00:41.10] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: My name is Sister Irma Obabashian, and I am 75 years old.

[00:00:48.06] SHANNON GREEN: Would you tell us a little bit about your early life, your childhood, and you can start with where you were born and a little bit of your family history. I know you have a great migration story, so if you want to share some of that with us, that would be great.

[00:01:03.01] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: Well, thank you. Thanks, Shannon. I--my heritage is Armenian, and I grew up in an Armenian Orthodox family. And I was born in the only city in the world that is built on two continents, which is Istanbul in Turkey. And I also have the--had the privilege of being born in the part of Istanbul that is called Karaköy, which actually is the city of Chalcedon where the treaty [Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon, held in 451] occurred way in the olden days of history. I grew up there, went to Armenian parochial schools, and grew up in a religious family. My father was involved in the Church. I have a younger brother--he's three and a half years younger than I, and there was just the four of us in the family. And we were not rich, but relatively upper-middle class--a comfortable family in Istanbul. And we never thought that what happened to us was going to happen to us.

[00:02:21.17] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: So, in 1955, There was a major antagonistic movement against the Christians by the Turks. And it had to do with the ownership of the island of Cyprus. At that time, half the island was owned by the Greeks, and half the island was owned by the Turks, and each one was vying for the other half. So--and it kind of spilled over from the island of Cyprus over to Istanbul, where the Turks decided that they were going to kind of take their wrath against the Christians. But instead of just going after the Greeks, they lumped all Christians together. So, I believe it was September 5, in 1955, when there was a riot in the city of Istanbul against the Christians by the Turks. It was an overnight thing, and nobody knew what was going on. But in our town, we lived right across from a Greek elementary school, and there were mobs, apparently--in those days we didn't have television, et cetera. And my parents turned on the radio, but there was nothing on the radio. But later, we discovered that even the police was involved in the organization

of this event, so that's why there was--nobody knew anything. But we heard a mob come around the corner from our street and attack the Greek school across from us, and put it--lit a fire, and the school got on fire. And it's--you know, those streets in the Middle East are narrow and they're cobblestone, and so my father ran across the street to try and wake up the janitor family--they had husband and wife and two little girls that we knew well, and we played together. And when he heard the mob--my dad heard the mob coming around the corner--he ran across and my mother was screaming after him, because she knew he was probably going to be killed. Anyway, he was able to wake up the family and tell them to escape out the back door of the school section that they lived in. So, he accomplished that, and he had just barely gotten back into our house--front door--that the mob reached the school. And--so they--and we were all very, very, very scared. And about maybe a half hour or so, the place is on fire. And in those days, in those countries, you did not have fire departments coming around the corner to put out the fire, et cetera. So, what happened was, we had a professor--a young man, Turkish gentleman--who lived about four doors down from us. And he--everybody had wakened, but we all stayed in our homes. And so, he came out with a--is it a bullhorn, do they call it? He came out with that and came and faced the mob and said, "This is a good neighborhood. These people are good people. You are disgracing our Turkish national pride." And so, he was able to convince them to put the fire out. And so--and he got us basically out of trouble. And they eventually--the mob--left. But the very next morning, my father--during the night, we never slept. So, during the night, my mom and dad had been talking, and were very, very afraid. And the next morning my father told my brother, who was at that time nine and a half years old, he said, "I want you to come with me. I'm going to go to my business across the Bosphorus"--straits of Bosphorus where--downtown area where his business was. He had cabinetmaking factory--two of them. And so, he took Kirk and they went, and he rented a taxi once they got to the other side, and really went all over downtown looking at what had happened during the night. Greek churches, Armenian churches, all kinds of stores, department stores, that had Armenian names or Greek names were essentially demolished. And so, as difficult as it was, my dad decided that that was no place to live any more, and that also, there's forceful [enforced] military service there. So, Kirk eventually was going to have to go into the Turkish military, and my dad--he had been in it three times. So, he didn't want Kirk to go--to have the same--.

[00:07:19.15] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: So, next few weeks, my mom and dad decided we needed to leave. Well, that was easier said than done, we found, because you could not sell anything. A Turkish citizen could not sell anything, could not take out your money from the bank and leave with it. So, there were very strict rules about how you could leave the country. And so, it was an amazing thing that happened to us. My dad had a four-story apartment building in a different part of town, and he couldn't sell it so that we would move. And what happened was, he eventually ended up selling it. To make a long story short, after five o'clock this particular day, after the banks were closed, he sold it to a Greek gentleman in cash for the building. He came home with the cash money, and we were all ready to leave the next morning. And my mother sewed that cash and other moneys that my dad had been able to take out of the bank--not all the money--into sheets that they wrapped around Kirk and I, so that they didn't think--. It was in March--we were leaving in March, and we had layers and layers of clothing--seven layers of clothing on. And these strips--my mom had sewn strips with white sheets that we had--cut them up. And so the moneys would fit right in there. And so, these big long strips they wrapped around us under our coats and jackets and everything else. And when we went to the port the next morning, because we were leaving for France, they didn't search us. And we were sworn to secrecy that if they had, that we would say, "I know nothing. I don't know anything. I don't know anything." So, my dad had bribed--bribery is big in those countries. So, my dad had bribed the officers, and so they didn't really search us. And so--and it's a long story, because we were leaving permanently for France, because my mom had an uncle who had done our papers so we could leave, except we still could not emigrate. We were going to France as tourists for a month. And that was the official paperwork.

But, since we knew we were leaving and not coming back, we had--suitcases and trunks, et cetera, which my dad had bribed the officers of the ship to get all that stuff onto the ship--to the cruise ship--the night before in the dead of night, so that it wouldn't be searched. And so, that's what we did. And the next morning, we got on the ship and went to France.

[00:10:19.14] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: And the other story that's interesting relating to this, is that because my dad could not take his bank account with him, or transfer it or anything, he and his brother had gone to--there's money launderers in the Middle East, that had--at that time there were--and I'm sure there's some now. So, he and my uncle went to this man who did this business, and he was--the guy--they were going to give the man half the money that dad had. And he said to my uncle--my dad did--"If I write you from France and say, 'Thank you, I received the handkerchiefs', that means I got the half the money okay from this money broker, so go give him the other half." So, they went--they're sitting with this gentleman, of course, and he says, "There's no paper. There's nothing to sign. Everything is I'm going to tell you where to go in France, you're going to keep that in your mind. There's not going to be a piece of paper with no telephone numbers, no nothing, written." So, my dad did that. And so, when we went to Paris, about the third day we were there, he and my mom were going to try and find this man. And so, they went together, and he said--my dad said to my mom--"Stay downstairs on the street level, because I don't know what's going to happen up there"--because this place was on the fourth floor of this building. And so, he got up there--dad did--and he said to my mom, "If I'm not back down in forty-five minutes, come, because something has happened to me." Because, you know, you never know. So, he went up, and thank God the guy was really nice, and they started talking. They went--and then in the middle--like they'd been over forty-five minutes, and all of a sudden, my dad jumped up and said, "Oh my God, my wife is going to kill me"--realizing that, of course, my mom was dying downstairs not knowing what was happening. So, then he wrote to my uncle and he sent the other half.

[00:12:40.08] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: And so--but it was a very difficult adjustment for our family. Only my mother spoke French--fluent French. But none of us did. Kirk and I were put in French public school--didn't know hardly much French at all. We had learned a few little bits in elementary school. We were treated as immigrants. And French, we found, were a little bit haughty in that regard, they looked down upon us, like we had never had anything or were somebody or anything like that. And it was really, really hard for us. Kirk and I used to sit on the bench in the schoolyard. Nobody would play with us. Nobody would even look at us that much. And my dad was having similar problems, because he hardly ever worked when we were in Istanbul. He had worked hard when he was growing up and everything like that. So, but then he had to go back to the factory level--conveyer belt type carpentry. And his ego was shattered and--we were having a really, really hard time emotionally as a family. My mother was a saint--she was really trying to hold everything together well. And she succeeded, but dad had decided--he just couldn't handle it.

[00:14:02.27] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: So, from there we moved to Lebanon, because we had friends who--when we moved to France from Istanbul, they had moved from Istanbul to Lebanon--to Beirut. And so, they kept telling my father come, come, this is so beautiful, and there's the water--we were missing the ocean--the Mediterranean too. They said the Mediterranean's right here, and just beautiful, climate's good, and there was a very thriving Armenian community, churches and schools and all. So, we decided, well one more time we'd move. So, my dad went first, and he rented a place, an apartment, et cetera. So, my mom and brother and I went. And the one thing my mom--the story she used to tell--is we got to Beirut to the airport, and we have several luggages and we have a trunk and all that. And so, the customs--immigration gentleman said to my mother in French--because in Lebanon, during the War [World War II] it was French

territory, so everybody speaks French as well, because we didn't speak any Arabic. So, asked my mother, said, "Do you have any guns in that trunk?" And my mother said, "Guns? Why would I have guns in that trunk? I'm coming to live with my family--to this country that we hear is beautiful and wonderful", et cetera. And it was very, very lovely. We did really well--we loved it. I went to school--my high school there, and university--the first time around. I graduated from the American University in Beirut. We did a degree in Biology and Medical Technology. And I was hired at the university. It's a 1,300-bed teaching hospital on the grounds of the university. So, I was hired in the Chemistry lab, and worked there for two years.

[00:16:00.13] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: But, the beginnings of the Arab-Israeli Conflict was starting. And this is in the middle 60's--early to middle 60's. And once more, we were subject to a six-month civil war, where my mom used to go out on our porch--during the night there was gunfire--gun battles. And the empty shells would end on our porch. So, in the morning my mom would go out with a dustpan and sweep them in. And curfew was during the day--only--you could only go out for two hours to buy bread and flour, whatever. Everyone was told to live behind two sets of walls, so therefore you couldn't live in your rooms. You had to live in the hallway. And so, for six months we pulled our beds out in the hallway, we ate in the hallway. My mother cooked in the kitchen barely, quickly. And so it was--so, as happy as we had been, it was evident--and Kirk now was sixteen, and it was evident that again the Middle East was not a really safe place.

[00:17:21.15] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: And I had gotten--when I finished the university, I graduated Magna Cum Laude, and I had gotten a post-graduate grant to come to the University of Toledo in Ohio, which has reciprocity with the American University in Beirut. And I had a full scholarship for--to do my masters degree there. And I wanted to come in the worst way. And of course, my dad said, "I am not sending my only daughter, who is now about eighteen/nineteen, to the United States where this Hippie Movement is in full bloom, and all these drugs, and "find yourself" thing." So, he said, "You're not going." Well, I cried and cried and cried--didn't make any difference. I was not coming. So--however, it allowed my dad to rethink maybe, as we were rethinking our future. So, we inquired to come to the United States. And that was in 1962 I think it was--'61 or 2. And we were told that, from Lebanon at that time, you had to have a fourteen-year quota, to wait in line to come to the United States. So, when I hear the immigration stories today, and people coming across the borders, et cetera, or even legal immigrants, I can really empathize with them, and I had feelings for it myself. Well, we couldn't wait fourteen years, obviously, and we were fortunate, because at that time Canada was accepting immigrants from the Middle East.

[00:19:07.08] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: So, we officially applied and we were accepted. And so, within the next two years we came to Canada in 1964--March of 1964. And I took the exams for medical technology, because they recognized my education. And I started working in a French hospital in Montreal. And by that time, I was able to speak French, and so I really liked it--it was wonderful--except it was really cold. And we were not used to it coming from there. My parents hated it, and I didn't like driving in it--I'd never driven in snow before, et cetera. So, anyway, but it was good. And so, we lived there for about nine--maybe eight years. But my parents really wanted--my dad was looking to retire. And they wanted to be back in a temperate climate for retirement. And we had friends who had moved to California from Lebanon. So--and they kept saying, "Oh this is just like Beirut. Come, come, come, come. We have lemon trees growing all over, we have oranges on the trees--come over here." So, I--dad said, "What do you think?" Because my father always asked my opinion on things--I had grown up that way always. I was the older of the two. Anyway, so I said, "Dad, let me see if I can go work." So, when I inquired, I sent all my paperwork to Chicago to this place that evaluates them, and they told me that for my education at the university in Beirut and my two years of working experience in Beirut, I was given credit of one college year. So, if I came to the United States, I would have to go back to the university as a

sophomore. That was the only thing they could do for me. So, I went back--oh, I was disappointed and started talking to my family, and my father said, "You know, you've been working now for eight years, and two years there, et cetera. If you want to do this, I'll support you." And so, here I was--I'm thinking, oh jeez, you know, I'm twenty-six years old, do I want to go back to school now? But that was the only way that my parents could come. So, I felt a responsibility for all that they had done for us--given up everything, really. And it was just up to me for their next steps. And so, I decided, well, Irma, you need to do this. It's not a matter of--you don't really have an option. I mean, I did, but I didn't. So, I went to the embassy in Montreal, to the US embassy, and talked to the Vice Counsel about the situation. And she said to me--she was a darling lady--and she said, "Okay, well you know, if you want to go study, here's a book, and you can have this next room over there, where there's a nice long table, and you can look--see through to see what colleges offer a Medical Technology degree, so that you can go there three years and then write the exams." Because they wouldn't even let me write the exams in the United States. That's what I was arguing with them--I said, "Let me write the exams, and if I fail, which is what I did in Canada, then make me go back to school. But if I pass, then I shouldn't have to go." Well, no, that didn't work. So, anyhow, she gave me a book that was three times as thick as the old telephone books. So, I went into that room, and I spent the whole afternoon and the next whole day--those pages are thin on those pages--on those phone books--looking to see what colleges in the Los Angeles area offered Medical Technology. And there were several, Mount Saint Mary's being one of them. And so, I went home and I selected thirteen total, sort of close to Hollywood where my friend Alice and her husband lived. And so, I applied to all thirteen, including UCLA and USC and Pepperdine--at the time, the Malibu campus [of Pepperdine] was not built yet, they were downtown. And I got accepted in all of them, except that Mount Saint Mary's was the only college--"college" at the time that offered me a scholarship. And because my grades had always been so good, but as a foreign student I didn't qualify for scholarships in the other ones. So, Sister Joseph Adele Edwards [(1933-2011)] was our Admissions person then, and she wrote me the most beautiful letter of welcome, and urged me to accept the scholarship, and that they would love to have me come, et cetera. So, that's kind of how it happened, that I landed at the Mount in--let's see--I guess it was August of 1970.

[00:24:14.02] SHANNON GREEN: I love that story. Could you share a little bit about the Sisters, and if you could name as many names as you can that you met and who really nurtured you in those three years, the holidays you spent with them, et cetera?

[00:24:29.25] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: Sure. The Sisters at the Mount--well, because I was older, I requested a private room at the dorm--in the dorm. So, it so happened that my room was right next to Sister Mary Frederick Arnold's [(-2012)] room. And she was sort of like the floor moderator for our fourth floor in Brady Hall. And so, I got to know Sister Mary Frederick very well, because I used to be up late and my door open, and she used to be in her room with her door open, and I never even thought that a Sister was that available to students in the evenings and whatnot. She was a wonderful, wonderful Sister. And then, of course I got to know Sister Rose Bernard [Sister Rose Bernard McCabe, CSJ (1911-1992)] very well, who was our Director of Residence at that time. And I--in fact, when I first met Sister Mary Frederick, the very first day that I met her, she was in the habit and everything. I asked--she welcomed me--and said, "Are you new?" I said, "Yes," and I told her. And she said--I said to her, "Are you a student?" And she said, "No, I'm one of the faculty here." And so, anyhow, it was--I got to know the Sisters really, really well. I spent a lot of time with Sister Annette Bower, because I was a Biology major. And I--because I was here all the time--I was at the college all the time--I didn't have the money to go home, like for Christmas or Thanksgiving, et cetera--I just stayed there. And I was old enough to like, be on my own. So--and the Sisters were so kind. I think they sort of--I felt that they sort of appreciated my sadness of being away from family, appreciated my being--having had the life before I came to the college.

And I think they just kind of embraced me. So, for the holidays, they would always invite me to join them. In the beginning, I was not even a Catholic--so at the beginning, I was like--felt a lot out of place. "Oh, gosh, what am I doing here in this dining room full of all these Sisters?" But Sister Eloise Therese [Sister Eloise Therese Mescall, CSJ (1919-2001)]--she was another one. I spoke French, so she and--so she--we used to always converse in a little bit of French, which made me feel good. Sister Anne Marie Sheldon [(1920-2003)]--she used to call me "Irmalinka", and she was very warm person.

[00:27:11.24] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: And so, I didn't feel--I felt at home--miles away from home. And it just sort of pulled me to question certain things. I reflected a lot. And the other person that was sort of key in my spiritual transformation here at Mount Saint Mary's was Monsignor O'Reilly [Monsignor James Donald O'Reilly (1916-1978)]. Monsignor O'Reilly had been our priest there--chaplain--for a number of years, and I got to know him personally, because eventually I went to classes from him--private classes, to become a Catholic when I decided to do so in my junior year. But I found that Monsignor O'Reilly knew a lot about the Armenian Church. He knew all the rubrics and he knew--and I was taken aback, because up until that time, almost nobody had heard of Armenians. I mean, they didn't know who I was really--my history and stuff--cultural history. So, I really took a liking to the Sisters and to him. And that's sort of how my years developed at the Mount.

[00:28:34.26] SHANNON GREEN: So, I have kind of two streams. One is, I would love to hear more from you about--and you started to reflect on this a little bit--how being an immigrant--or I don't know if you identified as a refugee--how that has shaped your identity in some ways. And then, I want to come back to that point in your life and when you started to think about becoming Catholic and then becoming a Sister. So, I don't know, if there's one of those that you want to start with, and then follow up with the other.

[00:29:04.05] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: Okay. Why don't I start with the--how I related to the immigrants? I think one of the things that I still, to this day, reflect on and touches me is what it means for someone to leave behind everything that they know, and go to a place where they don't know. That, in and of itself, is a huge challenge on any person. On top of that, it's not just the not knowing of the culture, but it's the not knowing of the language, not knowing the rules and regs. I remember, when we moved to Canada--now the Middle East is on the Metric system--Canada is not. So, here we are, we rented an apartment, and we're going to furnish it. And my mother wanted drapes in the living room. So, we went to get drapes at the department store, and we couldn't--we kept looking on the package, and it was so many inches by so many inches. We had no clue what that meant--if that would cover the window--the first time we did this. So, after that, we always carried a tape measure in the purse, and we would measure at home what we needed, and then the tape measure had both sides. So, when we went to the store, we would use the other side. But, it sounds like a small thing, but it isn't. We had no idea that Wonder Bread existed. My father called it "rabbit food". He said, "They call this bread?" Because, in the Middle East, just like in France, bread is the real thing--I mean, it's--. So, I appreciate the immigrants--what they have to give up, and unless you've walked in those shoes, it really is difficult to fully identify with those feelings. It's not just the feeling of loss and grief. It's a feeling of losing your identity. And I think my compassion for the immigrants at--all the time--has been that loss of identity. Because even for me, when I came to the Mount I spoke English, and I spoke fluent English, and I spoke fluent French. But I was looked at as a foreigner. I was still a foreigner in the dorms. And when we gathered in the lounge--my classmates and upper classmates, whatever--I couldn't relate to some of the things they were talking about, whether it was the movies or--it was not in my experience and I felt left out. And so, integration into a new culture is a phenomenal emotional strain. And I am not sure that to this day we value the trauma that that integration causes for people. It scars them for life--it really

does. People try to fit in--they have to, because this is their new life, and they try to integrate, learn the new language, et cetera, but I think, in the long run, all those things are Band-Aids. As good as it can be, even the best ways are Band-Aids, because the people's identity is already rocked out of its stronghold. And it's very difficult to re-establish that identity in a culture--in a different culture. So, when I watch TV and I see--and especially those boat people that end up in Lesbos in Greece--and people in Syria, people in Central America coming--I lived in Arizona, obviously--the hot seat for border crossings, et cetera. I volunteered at the Catholic Community Services for the migrants in the Alitas program [Casa Alitas Program, Arizona]. I just have a very different connection with them. I feel it, and I don't know how else to say it.

[00:34:05.23] SHANNON GREEN: So, if we could go back to your--faith development, what's happening in your own faith life at the Mount--what brought you to Catholicism and then--and I don't know if that was immediately connected to your desire for religious life? But if you could share that--a little bit of that piece of your journey as well?

[00:34:26.14] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: Sure. When I was out the Mount, as I said, I came in as my sophomore year, and it was--I was there a year experiencing the Sisters. And in fact, during that sophomore year, now that I think of it, I went home in the summer--at the end of the sophomore year. And at two different times during that summer--well, during the year I had become friends with Sister Annette Bower. And I'd also become friends with Sister Margaret O'Rourke [Sister Margaret Marie O'Rourke, CSJ--MSMU Biology faculty]. So, I had invited each of them to come to Montreal to visit me--my family--get to know my family while I was there, in the summertime--even though I was working. But--so, both of them did come at separate times, and stayed with us, and got to know my family. And so, I think that--that helped me to get to know them much, much better than I otherwise would have. So, when I came back next fall, in my junior year, I had kind of been thinking about--where is my life going? I could graduate--I knew I would--and I could find a job--I knew I would. The next step was going to be to bring my family, legally, whatever I needed to do for that, et cetera--to offer my parents retirement that they wanted. But there was something else, that for me, it was like, okay, I'm not getting younger. What choice do I need to make for my life now that this other steps are almost coming to an end, as it were? And I felt that God was saying to me--with all the experiences I had had for grief and loss, et cetera, I think I felt God was calling me to serve others. It was more that than the call I felt was serving others. I'd always been a generous person, but not as formally as may be. And then, the fact that I'd watched the Sisters for over a year. So, I went in and talked to Monsignor O'Reilly, and I said--just from the cold--"You know, this is kind of what I'm thinking. I'm wondering if I have a vocation. I don't know." So, he was the one who was able to talk me through. I had always grown up in a family--we didn't pray together, because that's not the norm in the Armenian culture. But my grandparents, my parents were church-going people, and people with values. And in the Armenian tradition, we have like the Jewish "mitzvahs"--we have sayings. And even though it's not overtly used, throughout the day there's little phrases that are part of the culture that one uses, to thank God for whatever, or to ask God for whatever. So, anyhow--but Monsignor knew all of that--that was the fascinating thing. So, I just felt that this was God leading me to someone who could actually help me sort. And so, then I went home--I think it was the next summer--and I didn't know what to do with this thing, because I didn't know if I should tell my parents, or not tell my parents, or whatnot. So, I decided not to tell them, and to explore some more. Then I talked to Sister Mary Frederick, and she was really wonderful and encouraged me. As you know, she had--she's a psychologist. So, she encouraged me to do some deep thinking. And so, I would see her once a week, and we would chat--sometimes a long time in the evening we would chat. And then, I started talking to Sister Annette a little bit about how she saw me, because she's the one that knew me the best, because we spent evenings together down in the lab and doing different things. And so, I felt that maybe I should ask God to lead me even more closely to where he wanted me to

be. And I felt I--that I--that the Sisters were a good fit for me. I had not explored other communities. I didn't even know all that many other communities--I just didn't. But, I felt this--the way these Sisters were, and what was important to them, was important to me. And that was the connection, I think. Plus the fact that they seemed normal. And I was afraid to tell my parents, even though I knew that since they had been exposed to Margaret O'Rourke and Annette Bower, that they would consider the Sisters pretty normal. Because my dad didn't have much to do with nuns and all they knew was "The Nun's Story". So, but even so--so, I kind of decided to go ahead with it, and I applied. But just before I applied--the community to be considered as a candidate--my mom died. And so, she died very suddenly in twenty minutes, so it was very, very difficult. So--and my dad took a little bit of a turn toward depression. And Kirk was married in Canada, so, it was like I went through a major, major emotional struggle--spiritual struggle, really--to ask. And I kind of fought with God for a long time--a couple of years, actually--to say--because my mom died in '75, and I didn't enter until '77. So, those years I was fighting with God, I think, to say, "What do you want me to do? I was all set to serve you, and now you take away my mom, who's the anchor of our family. And I'm the older girl--my brother's married, has got a wife and little baby. So, am I supposed to take care of my dad? Am I supposed to go back to Canada, because they're not coming here--were not there yet." And of course, dad didn't want to come after my mom died, because he wanted to stay with Kirk and the grandbaby. So, it's like, I couldn't figure out what God wanted me to do. And I thought--so, I went up and down, up and down emotionally, on a real, real roller coaster, to say okay. Because, traditionally, see, I had grown up in a traditional family. So, independence is not a big value for us. And I was afraid that my dad and my brother would look at my decision to enter community as being good to myself and being independent, rather than caring for the family. And I didn't want that. So, I had this major, major spiritual struggle. And I went home that summer, and my father didn't speak to me at all. We used to sit--I'd sit at one end of the couch, he'd sit at the other end of the couch, watch TV. I'd go, "Dad, can I get you a cup of tea?" "No." "Can I get you anything?" "No." And that was what the extent of the conversation. And I was just heartbroken. I came back, and I still didn't know what I wanted to do. So, by the Grace of God, when I went back the following year, I had to tell him, because it was coming close time to enter--or to, at least hear from the community. And so, when I told them, it was my brother, my sister-in-law, my dad at the dinner table. And a plate from--his dinner plate--came flying over across the table, and I had to duck so it wouldn't hit me. He was that mad. He couldn't understand it. It was a betrayal. All this stuff came out. And it was hard--it was really, really hard. But, you know, when I hear of the poem, "The Hound of Heaven" [poem "The Hound of Heaven (1893) by Francis Thompson (1859-1907), English poet], I can relate to that first few lines of that poem for my life. God did not let go of me. And I was trying to make all kinds of decisions for my family, and I'd almost decided your first priority is to your father. He gave up everything for you--came oceans away and didn't speak the language, et cetera--the whole scene. And I said, "Irma, you have a responsibility. You cannot do what you're doing for your future. You have to take care of your family first, and then you can--if they die, when they die, you can do--." But, God was the Hound of Heaven. He would not let me go. And so, plate or not, I decided this is what I needed to do. So, I came back and applied and got accepted into the community. And of course, for two years he never talked to me. But, things changed afterwards when they came to visit. [laughs].

[00:44:17.26] SHANNON GREEN: I think that story could be very helpful for our students--in their own discernments. Do you have any thoughts about--if you were to meet one of our Mount students today, could be from an immigrant family, first-generation college student, struggling with her own vocation and calling and discernment, versus expectations of a family, or hopes from a family--do you have any advice? What would you say to a young woman who's in that kind of discernment?

[00:44:50.05] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: I would say, "Pray, pray, and pray some more." Because as

my mom would say, you never know when God's door is open and chances are it's open all the time. I think that a struggle like that is huge. However, if God wants you, somehow or other he will get you there. And so, I would say, trust, because if that feeling and those thoughts are coming to you--that sense is coming to you--it is of God. And so, trust it. And whatever happens along the way--the steps--you also have to trust. And some of the steps might not be nice--like they weren't, you know? But you have to trust that God is holding you by the hand and leading you. One of the big things that I grew up with in terms of cultural belief, and in the Armenian Church, and the culture--we believe--like--we believe in the transcendent God a little bit more, than in--this--minute God--Jesus is walking with me every step of the way. We believe that, but we look at God as more of a transcendent God, the father figure, and all of that. And that one of the things that we believe in, is we trust in the providential care of a loving father that God is. So, I would say to those students, trust in the providential care of a loving father, and listen. It may take a while--just don't give up--because God's not giving up on you, if he's got you by the neck. [all laugh].

[00:46:53.08] SHANNON GREEN: So, in the time we have left, there's kind of two more areas I'd like to explore a little bit. One is kind of mission, charism of the Sisters, how you have--how that has grabbed you--what speaks to you now, or how you articulate that now--the future of that. And then also, a little bit about the evolution of your healthcare ministry and how you went kind of from a science background into pastoral care and those kinds of--so, those are the kind of the two areas I think--with some--also, some final little things that I'd like to explore. You want to talk about mission and charism?

[00:47:29.05] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: Yeah. Let me maybe say something about mission and charism. I didn't know--I knew what "mission" meant--I'd never heard the word "charism". So, I didn't know what it meant. I had to look it up when I first heard it. But, I think sometimes--well, I believe that actions speak louder than words. That's been my mantra all my life. And so, "walk the talk" is what I believe in. So, in terms of charism, when we--when I read the Consensus Statement [CSJ Consensus Statement (1969)] for the first time, I could really resonate with the ideal that's expressed there. I was far from it. I mean, I wasn't even--I could have been a Sister of St. Joseph for a couple of years or whatever, but this is my fortieth year in religion. So, even now, when I read it, it's like oh my God I have a long way to go. But the charism is expressed very well there in the Consensus Statement. And I think that--what grabbed me, I think--a Sister of St. Joseph moves toward profound love of God--that comes first--and love of neighbor without distinction. And the charism that I subscribe to is a charism of interdependence, as opposed to a charism of independence. And I read that--maybe between the lines--but I did read that in the Consensus Statement--that our community is called to be for God, and to be for the dear neighbor. That was my desire all along, so I could get that--I got that. The thing that I had to work on, all along, myself, is that I perceived the American culture as an independent culture rather than an interdependent culture. And so, I had some questions during my religious life about--even our Sisters--because of their upbringing and the culture they lived in that were familiar with, that I know they were all--in the olden days they were pretty much "herded", as it were. But again, when Vatican II happened and sort of people found their ways, a sense of independence started evolving, even within community. And not--so, things changed. And I sometimes have questioned how that has affected our charism. Now, we speak those words, and I know every Sister of St. Joseph strives to live those words as best they can--I have no doubt about that. But not having grown in an interdependent culture, I find that it makes it difficult for them--more difficult for them--to embrace that sense of interdependence. And that's part of the call--we live in community. Well, what does that mean? What does that mean to live in community? I mean, I don't know. And there's some things that I'm wonderful--interdependent--I'm not saying that. Because in the olden days, there were like seven, eight, ten Sisters in a house and there were three cars. And you had to sign up on the calendar as to when you were going to take the car out, and when you had an

appointment, whatever. Well, now each one of us has the luxury of having a car at our disposal, and I don't have to ask anybody to use the car. I can jump in and drive wherever I want to drive. And could I, now, go back into that kind of a previous kind of a living situation, where I have to ask Sister So--and--so if I can take the car? It's harder. It's harder. And so, the whole charism of our ability to be for each other has improved but still needs work. I still think--we've come a long way since--in my forty years. We have. But we're not quite interdependent yet. And I think, if I'm reading between the lines of the Consensus Statement, there's a call there for interdependence. And you know, I guess maybe things will just progress on a daily basis until we die--I'm not sure. But--

[00:52:49.01] SHANNON GREEN: If I could ask a little follow up then to that. As you reflect on that, in your forty years, and how that continues to impact your immediate community--or the Sisters--how do you see the other partners and the other parts of the kind of extended charism family? How do you see them as--how do you see the future kind of evolving in terms of the charism?

[00:53:12.11] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: Well, you know, I think the future evolution of charism and mission may be is as follows: in the past, because of structure and what not, there was a greater "we/they" between the laity and our partners in ministry and the Sisters. It was a little bit like, "Please, Sister, have this seat" and please do this and please do that--it was like we were put on some kind of pedestal or something. The good thing, I think, for the future, is that as we evolve into being one with the neighbor, whether it means our dress, whether it means how we take fun--have fun--the fact that we go play, that kind of thing--I think it's leveled the playing field between the laity and the Sisters. So, there is a greater relationality I think. And that probably is the good thing for the future of the charism. And our young women now, that are--whether they're the St. Joseph Workers, or others--I think maybe we're a little bit easier "relatable", if there is such a word. Because we're kind of like them a little bit, but maybe not quite. So, I think that brings us a little bit closer. And that's what I'm hoping, for the future of the charism. And that's I think why we're partners--we call ourselves "partners" in ministry, not that we're their bosses and they're working for us.

[00:55:04.10] SHANNON GREEN: Thank you. We have a little bit of time. So, your ministry--you know, you've always been in the medical field of some kind--

[00:55:15.09] [Interviewer comments].

[00:55:52.20] SHANNON GREEN: So, if you could share a little bit about--after you've become a Sister, and--but you've come out of this medical field, how your ministry went, it seems, from some of the lab work and scientific work to administration and then pastoral care mission--all kinds of--so you have a particular perspective from the mission and charism within the Sister's experience through the healthcare ministries. I don't know how you've reflected on that over the years, and I know you've recently retired. And so, would you share a bit of that journey, of your ministry, and how that's evolved?

[00:56:31.00] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: Thank you, yes. I have--my ministry, as you mentioned, has been in healthcare--a total of fifty-one years--the day--the month I retired. I started, as a said, as a medical technologist in Lebanon. I was a medical technologist in Canada, at a French hospital. And then after I came here and got my license, graduated from the Mount, I worked at Daniel Freeman Hospital [Inglewood, California] in the lab as a lay person. And then I entered the community. So, when I entered the community, I was a medical technologist. And so, I was sent to Tucson as a first-year novice to work at St. Mary's Hospital for three months, just to get acquainted with those Sisters. And so, then I came back and was sent to Lewiston, Idaho into--so

there I was teaching, because they wanted me to have a little teaching experience. So, but I came back to--when I came back to--or made my first vows, I was sent back to Tucson to the lab. And I was there a year and a half, and lived with Sister--twenty other Sisters--at Maria Community. And the Sister's CEO at St. Mary's was Sister St. Joan Willart (1924-2007). And just a marvelous, marvelous human being. I cannot say enough about her. She's in my heart every day. She's my mentor in Administration. Because when I was at the convent I lived with her, et cetera. So, she kind of observed me all the way around sort of thing. And so, one day she called me to her office, and I had no idea what she was going to say to me. "Now, Irma," she says, "are you thinking you're going to stay in the lab all your life like you--" I said, "Sister, I really like it. Maybe I'll be a supervisor some day or something, but I do like it--the lab." And she says, "Well, have you ever given any thought to hospital administration?" And I said, "No, what do they do? I don't know what those guys do." So, she said, "Well, would you like to find out?" And I said, "Yes, that would be all right." So, she made arrangements with the community leadership for me to spend one year, come out of the lab at St. Mary's, stay at St. Mary's, and spend the year with herself and Mr. Tom Plantz, who was our Executive Vice President at the time, and just spend time with each administrator of each division, three or four months. So, I was with Nursing VP, and Plant Services VP, et cetera. So, I did that for a year, and it was a phenomenal experience. I loved it--I absolutely loved it. So, at the end of that year, she said, "So, what do you think?" So, I said, "Yeah, I think I like it." So, I spoke to the Provincial--she spoke for me, and so did I, and so I was given permission to study for a masters in Healthcare Administration. So, I went to University of Notre Dame [Indiana] and so, at St. Mary's I was given departments already. So, I was sort of an administrator in formation, as it were. So, I had fourteen departments at St. Mary's during the year, and I went to Notre Dame three months. And I did get my master there and came back and she gave me some more responsibilities. And it was consistent with my personality, and I really liked being able to sort of channel the work, in terms of giving people policies, procedures, et cetera that would benefit not just the patients, but the employees as well. And I was in my early forties, and I had a lot of energy. I'm a high-energy person. So, it was a good fit for me. Then, from St. Mary's--

[01:00:51.26] [Interviewer comments].

[01:01:06.28] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: So, I had been there five years in that Assistant Administrator position at St. Mary's when I was asked to consider going up to Pasco [Washington], to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. Sister Anthony Marie Phillips (-2010) had been there--the Administrator up there for many, many years. And Sister was retiring and coming back to LA--or Tucson rather. And for the first time, they had had a lay Administrator up there--a gentleman. And it wasn't really working out all that well. So, I was asked to go and be the Assistant, to patch the holes, as it were. So, I wasn't happy. I did not want to go. I was very happy in Tucson and at St. Mary's, and I didn't want to leave Sister St. Joan. And anyway, after some struggle, I did say yes. I went, and it just was a wonderful, wonderful experience. And what happened was that the Administrator there was let go, and then my friend who was the Administrator at St. Joseph's in Tucson while I was at St. Mary's, Tom Corley, was appointed as the Administrator up there. So, I was number 2 person up, working with Tom, and that--and just--it was just an amazing five years for me in Pasco. And so, then--and I did a lot for the hospital there. So then, after that I came back--they asked me to come down to the Marina hospital--[unintelligible] had had a lay Administrator and Sister Julia Mary [Sister Julia Mary Farley, CSJ (1926-2017)] had been the number 2 person there, and she was no longer be assuming that position.

[01:02:56.01] [Interviewer comments].

[01:03:25.12] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: So, Sister Julia Mary had just left the Marina, so I was brought in as the Administrator, because the Administrator was also let go. And I was a very, very

different person than Sister Julia Mary. And Sister Julia Mary had been the first Sister that was appointed there after the takeover from Memorial to [unintelligible] Marina. And we had a lot of Jewish doctors at the Marina. And for whatever reason--maybe because I was a foreigner, I'm not even sure--but they took a liking to me, and I was well-supported there. And I was able to turn the Marina Hospital pretty much around. We had had it for ten years at that time, and they had lost approximately twenty million dollars over that period of time. And in about four and a half years, I was able to get us in the black. And I did not do it--and that's kind of my motto for students who are looking to lead, et cetera--that if the people you're supervising feel they're with you--feel a part of what the mission is, and why we're doing what we're doing, and if you're very truthful and upfront with them, they turn the place around, not you. So, that's kind of what happened to me at the Marina.

[01:04:49.05] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: And then, I went to Memorial, and I was there for another maybe five years or so. And I felt at that time--I'd been in administration about twenty-one years, and I felt that I was getting a little older--my sixties--and I felt if I'm going to do something as another career--as a next career--that especially if I had to go study--I wanted to do it while I was still a bit more fresh. So, I talked to community and they asked me what I wanted to do next. And I said, "You know, I think I've done a lot of policies and procedures and I've been on boards, et cetera. I want to work with the patients. I still want to be in the hospital--that's my thing. But I want to work with patients directly." I'm not a nurse, so I thought, what if I study pastoral ministry. So, I was supported in that--community was very supportive. So, I took four units of CPE [Clinical Pastoral Education] at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange [California], and became an NACC [National Association of Certified Chaplains] National Certified Chaplain. And then, St. Joseph's in Orange immediately hired me on graduation, and I was the chaplain for the cancer program--inpatient and outpatient. They have a huge cancer program. And at that time, I myself developed breast cancer. And so, it was a good fit--it was a good fit. And so, after that, I had been there five years, when an opening in Tucson became available in spiritual care. And so, I was asked--they wanted Sisters still, because a number of older Sisters had come to Carondelet Center, and we were diminishing in numbers in Tucson. So, community asked me if I would consider going to Tucson, back to St. Mary's. And of course, I jumped. So, that was 2003, and I've been there ever since. I did pastoral ministry there--spiritual care--for twelve years, and then our CEO at the time asked me--we had a patient advocate who was a nurse--who was an RN who passed away very tragically, and we didn't have a replacement or anything. And she'd been doing that job for a number of years--doing it well. And so, our CEO asked me if I would consider leaving spiritual care and becoming the patient advocate for the hospital. And I had to think about that one for a little bit, but I decided, well--she said to me, "Well, you've been around a long time in healthcare. You know the families. You know what they're struggling with", et cetera, et cetera. So, I said, "Okay." So, I became the patient advocate. I did that for six years. And then, I decided it's time--I now have to do some other things that I haven't been able to do. So, I retired and now I'm heavily involved with Catholic Community Services of Tucson on a volunteer basis.

[01:08:00.20] SHANNON GREEN: What is Catholic Community Services?

[01:08:02.19] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: It's like Catholic Charities. They have all kinds of programs. At the moment, actually the exciting thing is, we're working on the medical respite for the homeless, just like Sister Adele [Sister Adele O'Sullivan, CSJ, MD] has in Phoenix. Well, we're starting one in Tucson. We're in the fund-raising campaign, and I'm on their foundation board as well as the corporate board. And it's just--they have just a phenomenal number of wonderful programs for the community. They've been around for a long time.

[01:08:33.06] SHANNON GREEN: We're coming near the end of our time. I know--there's so much

more I could ask you about. But I always ask--

[01:08:39.12] [Interviewer comments].

[01:08:51.26] SHANNON GREEN: I always ask, towards the end of the interview, what is the greatest joy of your religious life? Or has been?

[01:08:58.06] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: The greatest joy of my religious life has been a sense that--and I say this humbly--that I'm part of a story that started with courageous women, with dedicated women, who gave of themselves to do something good for God. And little me, I'm somewhere in there in the story. That's been the greatest joy. The "Trek" Sisters [Trek of the Seven Sisters] just stopped me from breathing, almost. I cannot understand their--the strength, the faith, the abandonment to God's Providence, the desire to respond--I just can't. And if we enlarge that--because every one of our Sisters, in their own way, in their own places, have done marvelous things. And so, I'm a little link in there. And that's the greatest joy--that I can say my life is worth something--was worth something. When I go to see God, that's what I'm going to say. [all laugh].

[01:10:34.10] SHANNON GREEN: But, I was going to ask, and I often ask, is there a part of the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph that really connects to you and inspires you, and it sounds like maybe the Trek is part of that. But I don't know if there--are there other parts of the long 365-year history that really continue to move you and inspire you?

[01:10:52.16] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: The Trek is part of it, but probably more so is the first Sisters that came from France to Carondelet. Those first Sisters--French women--French girls--and at that time, really not exposed to anything that we might be exposed today, in terms of travel and conveniences and this and that and the other thing. They hadn't a clue where they were going. I don't even know if there were maps that they looked at to see where this Carondelet, Missouri place was. And how they decided to just say yes to a need. And I'm thinking, is it almost like, if God asked me today to go to a boondock place in China, would I say yes? And maybe even today there's people that speak English, but you know what I mean? So, that--those first Sisters that--they stop me--they do stop me. When I really kind of try to think about--they weren't--you can't do that out of obedience, just because a Superior asks you to go. I mean, maybe some did, I don't know. But there has to be something else, way down deep, that says leave your mom, leave your dad, leave your neighborhoods, don't speak the language, cross the ocean. Then you come to this country and all these people are strange. How do you do that? And why do you do that? Why do you do that? And I think that's what stops me is the why--and then the how.

[01:12:46.27] SHANNON GREEN: Is there--you've kind of said this--but is there something you're most proud of as being--from your congregation or your province?

[01:12:58.14] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: You know, I think I'm proud of our progress, in a way--the last forty years that I'm familiar with. That as I mentioned earlier, I think we're evolving into a much more inclusive community than we were before. I think that--at least, I may be wrong, but it's my perception--that the things that maybe used to divide us are sort of falling a little bit more by the wayside. And that we're really making an effort to hold each other up, to get to know each other better. I remember early, early--I did not feel those were priorities. And that evolution--for a large number of women--is a difficult thing to do. And yet, I think our Province and congregation has done a good job in evolving well. And doesn't mean we don't have further to go--I don't mean that. But I'm proud of the work that's gone on, congregationally and in our Province to make that change. And I think it's a good thing.

[01:14:28.21] [Interviewer comments].

[01:14:41.04] SHANNON GREEN: So, Sister, is there anything you reflected on for today that I haven't asked you about or that you haven't had a chance to share?

[01:14:49.27] SISTER IRMA OBABASHIAN: I don't think so. I think we covered pretty much everything.

[01:15:01.21] [Interviewer comments].

[01:15:15.06] [End of interview].

Interview Transcript

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Interview Date: 08/02/2019

Interviewee: Sister Irma Obabashian

Interviewer: Shannon Green, Director, CSJ Institute, Mount Saint Mary's University; Roman Zenz, Film and Television, Mount Saint Mary's University; Mary Trunk, Instructor, Film and Television, Mount Saint Mary's University

Location: Carondelet Center, Los Angeles, California.

Transcription Date: 08/21/2019

Transcribed By: Nancy Steinmann

[00:00:00.00] [Director's comments].

[00:00:14.24] Date, time, participants.

[00:00:34.08] Full name and age.

[00:00:48.06] Childhood in Istanbul, Turkey.

[00:02:21.17] Movement against Christians by the Turks (1955) over island of Cyprus. Mob burning down local school.

[00:07:19.15] Fleeing to France.

[00:10:19.14] Issues with moving family money from Turkey to France.

[00:12:40.08] Adjusting to life in France as an immigrant.

[00:14:02.27] Moving to Beirut, Lebanon. Attending American University, receiving BA in Biology and Medical Technology. Working at the university.

[00:16:00.13] Arab-Israeli conflict (1960's). Six-month civil war.

[00:17:21.15] Attempting to immigrate to the US (1962).

[00:19:07.08] Moving to Canada (1964). Credit for education denied. Applying to Mount St. Mary's College, California. Sister Joseph Adele Edwards [(1933–2011)]. Arriving at Mount (1970).

[00:24:14.02] Sister faculty at MSMC. Sister Mary Frederick Arnold (–2012). Sister Rose Bernard McCabe, CSJ (1911–1992). Sister Eloise Therese Mescall, CSJ (1919–2001). Sister Anne Marie Sheldon (1920–2003).

[00:27:11.24] Spiritual transformation. Monsignor James Donald O'Reilly (1916–1978).

[00:29:04.05] Relating to other immigrants. Cultural differences. Losing one's identity. Later volunteering in Catholic Community Services Casa Alitas Program, Arizona to help other migrants.

[00:34:05.23] Faith development at the Mount. Sister Annette Bower. Sister Margaret Marie O'Rourke, CSJ [MSMU Biology faculty]. Early questions about vocation. Sister Mary Frederick Arnold. Mother's death in 1975. Issues with "leaving family" to enter religious life. "The Hound of Heaven

[(1893) by Francis Thompson (1859–1907), English poet]. Choosing to enter religious community.

[00:44:17.26] Advice to young women considering religious vocation.

[00:46:53.08] Mission and charism of Sisters of St. Joseph (CSJs). CSJ Consensus Statement (1969). Charism of interdependence rather than independence.

[00:52:49.01] Future of charism. Lessening of separation between religious and laity--"partners" not "bosses". St. Joseph Workers.

[00:55:52.20] Hospital ministry. Working in lab at Daniel Freeman Hospital [Inglewood, California]. Teaching in Lewiston, Idaho. Taking first vows. Working in lab at St. Mary's Hospital, Tucson, Arizona. Sister St. Joan Willart (1924–2007). Spending a year interning in hospital administration. Earning masters in Healthcare Administration at Notre Dame University [Indiana]. Managing 14 departments at St. Mary's Hospital.

[01:01:06.28] Working as Assistant Administrator at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Pasco Washington. Sister Anthony Marie Phillips (–2010). Mr. Tom Corley, Administrator, Pasco, Washington. Sister Julia Mary Farley, CSJ (1926–2017). Working as Administrator at Marina Hospital [California??].

[01:04:49.05] Working as Administrator at Memorial Hospital. Becoming National Association of Certified Chaplains Certified Chaplain. Working as chaplain in cancer program at St. Joseph's Hospital, Orange, California. Returning to St. Mary's in Tucson to work in pastoral ministry (2003). Becoming patient advocate for St. Mary's Hospital. Retirement work as volunteer in Catholic Community Services of Tucson.

[01:08:00.20] Catholic Community Services. Sister Adele O'Sullivan, CSJ, MD--healthcare for the homeless.

[01:08:51.26] Greatest joy of religious life. Trek of the Seven Sisters.

[01:10:34.10] Inspiration from CSJ history. First Sisters.

[01:12:46.27] Pride in congregation and Province.

[01:15:15.06] End of interview.